Title
Water and Women’s Empowerment in the Ferghana Valley: Agency of Older Women from Soviet Era in Contemporary Rural Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2hp521v6

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Publication Date
2008-02-01
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Abstract
This paper examines the multiple variables that influence Kyrgyz and Uzbek women to take on leadership and decision making positions through their participation in village water committees. Socio-familial roles assigned by age and the political era in which women grew up (Soviet or Post Soviet) are seen as the major influences that determine whether and how women across different ethnicities (Kyrgyz & Uzbek) and nationalities (Kyrgyzstan & Uzbekistan) perceive their empowerment in agency and individual through their association with the water development sector. The development organizations working in the Ferghana region have continued to involve women in community resource management. This research shows that older women who were born and raised during the Soviet era are able to take on strong leadership roles in comparison to women who lived through the years of economic and political transitions starting in the late 1980’s

Introduction
Does the fulfillment of basic practical needs lead to the realization of strategic needs or vice versa? This debate has continued to occupy the forefront of development discourse over the past two decades. While the water policy analysts tend to focus more on the practical needs of the people, the gender theorists and development workers are biased towards the strategic need theory. The aim of this paper is to understand the local conceptualization of the practical and strategic needs of the women of Ferghana valley
and to recognize the influence women’s upbringing, education and socialization during soviet vs. post-soviet era has in their ability to participate in water committees in their respective villages. This paper is based on four months of field research conducted between January and April 2006 in four villages in the Ferghana valley. The research area was chosen based on the project area of Central Asian Alliance for Water (CAAW), a non-profit organization (NPO) that works for the provision of safe drinking water in the Ferghana region. CAAW initiated pioneering work on issues of water and sanitation in the Ferghana region in 1997.

While studying what empowerment means for the women of the Ferghana region, the generational gap between soviet and post-soviet era women is evident in that the soviet women, owing to their education and socialization during the soviet times, are active in their village water committees and have been successful in creating a nexus of women active in the development sector across different villages, especially in Kyrgyzstan. The younger women of the post-soviet and transitional era are embracing the typified Kyrgyz and Uzbek roles deemed suitable for a traditional woman and thus unable to participate in water committees and other civic-developmental engagements. An ethnographic documentation of women’s answers to their perception about their lives, beliefs, traditions, changing social roles and statuses and participation in the development sector (i.e. the small water committees in their villages) highlight the generational reversion wherein the older women are socially and politically active within and outside their villages while the younger women have adopted the customary lives which their mothers or mother-in-laws did not abide by so staunchly during the soviet era.

Water problem in the Ferghana Valley and the role of CAAW:
Shared by three former Soviet Union Republics--Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan--the Ferghana Valley is home to more than ten million people with Turkic and Iranian heritages. Presently, according to official statistics, about 40 percent of the people in the Valley do not have access to safe drinking water (Gungoren and Regallet 1999). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, water problems grew worse due to lack of maintenance of the water systems and raising cost of operating energy-intensive systems. As a result, typhoid, dysentery, diarrhea, hepatitis and skin diseases are common among the population, particularly affecting young children and claiming lives (Gungoren and Regallet 1999; ICRC 2000). Women as a group (recognizing differences in age and socio-economic status) are faced with the task of carrying water from far and taking care of family members sick with water-borne diseases. Thus, they have less time to devote to productive activities.

Central Asian Alliance for Water (CAAW) is a non-profit organization that was registered in May 2001. It is a branch of the International Secretariat for Water (ISW), which is a NOVIB (Oxfam Netherlands). CAAW is working in the Ferghana region that spreads across Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. CAAW has been instrumental in providing safe drinking water to 53,000 people in the fourteen villages and this has led to a 60% reduction in water borne diseases over the past four years.

**Research Goals and Questions:** The main objective of this research is to understand whether women of different age groups have -or have not- benefited from their active or passive involvement in CAAW’s programs and, how exactly this impact differs for each group of Kyrgyz and Uzbek women. Two major research questions guide this study:
• How do the women of different age groups (research participants) understand and define their practical and strategic needs? Is there a significant difference between these definitions in Uzbek and Kyrgyz villages?

• Have women been able to formulate their strategic gender needs (leadership, increased decision-making capacity in household and community, respect from community, initiating income generating activity, etc.) through the realization of their practical gender needs (provision of safe drinking water, reduction of water-borne diseases, time saved, money saved, etc.)? If not, why? If yes, how?

• Research Methodology:

The women in each village are divided into three groups on the basis of their age and social roles. These three groups are: pre-reproductive group (12-18 years), reproductive age group (18-40), and post-reproductive age group (40-65). The issue of ethnic diversity has been taken into account by choosing two Uzbek and two Kyrgyz villages as the sample population for this study. In total, approximately 240 women participated in focus group discussions and 20 key informant interviews took place. The questionnaires for both focus groups and key informant interviews were divided into two sections: the first section included questions on women and water and how they benefited from CAAW’s programs. The second section included questions on leadership, power, decision-making, gender relations, and individual identity.

Research Area: Four villages (out of 14 villages where CAAW works) were selected using purposive sampling strategy in order to derive a representation of the ethnic diversity in the Ferghana valley. Therefore, Birlik and Yambarak are the two Uzbek villages chosen. Birlik is ethnically a 100% Uzbek village situated within Kyrgyzstan.
Yambarak is an Uzbek village located in Uzbekistan. The two Kyrgyz villages chosen were Kung Elek and Tulaykon. Kung Elek is a mountainous village that lies in Gulcha Rayon while Tulaykon falls under Rayon.

**Findings**

1. **Socialization Matters: From Soviet Emancipation to Lost Generation and now to Unknown Future:** Socialization that occurs early in a girl’s life has life changing impact for the rest of her life was very evident during the course of this research. Post-reproductive age group in all villages regardless of their active or inactive status or ethnicity were more sympathetic to the notion of women’s leadership and were able to voice their practical and strategic gender needs more effectively compared to women of reproductive age group. On the contrary, most women of reproductive age group spoke of the lost opportunity as leaders in their communities as such attempts are curbed due to household responsibilities. Interestingly, the same group of women state that women are more professionals and sincere if given the opportunity to become the water committee directors. In comparison with the reproductive age group, women of post-productive age group were able to formulate better the possibility of having dual role as community leaders, water committee presidents and mothers and caretakers of family. This is probably the impact of socialization during Soviet times that focused on equality and the declaration by the Soviet government that women’s emancipation has been achieved. One active participant mentioned the need to organize women’s associations to overcome limitations to female leadership. Most participants in the focus groups of this “lost generation” place themselves in relation to their family, their children, and their house duties and had a hard time conceptualizing their wishes, dreams, and abilities as
individuals. One may ask why I harshly tag the 18-40 age group as the ‘Lost Generation’. Unlike the older age group women who were born and brought up in the Soviet era that propagated egalitarianism for all its people and thus enabled people to explore their interests beyond the constraints and demands of their society and economy, the ‘Lost Generation’ has witnessed neither strength in state ideology nor equality in social, economic and gender roles. With the disassociation of the Soviet Union, the ‘Lost Generation’ grew up and started family with great economic and social uncertainties that threw them into the routine life for basic subsistence. The taxing times made people forget socialism and egalitarianism and the Central Asian societies seem to be adopting a patriarchal social pattern. This has impacted women in the 18-45 age group greatly. These rural women neither received adequate education nor an opportunity to be introduced to a system that probably got women out of the household, even if they were doubly burdened by their formal employment and unchanged social roles. 

2. Life-cycle theory: The researcher could understand how the life cycle theory works out in reality for the research participants, specifically the inactive participants who were not directly involved in any decision making or leadership in their water management committees or with CAAW. Majority of the inactive women in the reproductive age group feel burdened by household responsibilities and thus, on being asked if they would like to be members / directors of their water committees, they say that they would like to but maybe after their children grow up, once they take care of mother-in-laws and father-in-laws, and once they become mother-in-law themselves. This pattern of waiting for the future to release them of their socially ascribed duties create an understanding of how women in all the four villages did not live their life on a day, month or year basis but
rather on the basis of what their present social role is and what it would be in the future, in congruence with a younger woman assuming her current responsibilities and thus releasing her in order to be proactive in things beyond the kitchen, childcare, elderly care and the like. Similarly, it was very interesting to note how some older women in the 40-65 age group, particularly in Tulaykon said they were too old to assume any community leadership and decision making position. They said they ‘wanted the youth to work now’ and that they would rather send their Kelins to sanitation trainings and their grandchildren to Youth Parliament trainings. The ‘Triple Burden of Women’ (Miller, 2001) was evident in many interviews. On the one hand, women were proud of their abilities to be able to handle multiple tasks but roles and on the other hand, they were complaining that they had to do everything. Water helps women at a crucial time where they have to bear the breadwinner role as well when men migrate to Russia or Kazakhstan for work. Active women mention that husbands allow them to work in water committees because they first fulfill their domestic obligations. This depicts how women are accustomed to handling many roles simultaneously while at the same time not realizing their expanded strengths and opportunities when treading the male work domain. Women often mentioned how they can do everything, chores that even men can not do and, how they must do everything, without any realization of why they never question their multiple roles/responsibilities and, household chores being thought as ‘easier’ by men and women alike.

3. Nation State vs. Ethnicity: Difference between Kyrgyz and Uzbek women and even within Uzbek women living in different settings were evident and interesting. At the outset, it was expected that being Kyrgyz or Uzbek would have a major impact on
women’s identity and how they viewed gender relations and issues through their active or inactive involvement in water sector in particular and in the community in general. However, findings indicate that this was not the case. Two ethnically Kyrgyz villages and one ethnically Uzbek village in Kyrgyzstan showed no major differences in the beliefs, opinions, roles, responsibilities, and relationships of women with regard to their male counterparts, their involvement in water project, and the benefits they derived from these associations. However, major differences in opinions were observed between women from the Uzbek village in Uzbekistan and the other three village women from Kyrgyzstan for all age groups. It is evident that rather than ethnic identity, it is the state ideology that mould women’s psyche from early in life. It was noted repeatedly during interviews that women in the Uzbek village of Yambarak referred to Islam as the guiding principle in their lives and did not question the religious interpretations of gender inequality as taught to them. Other Ethnically Uzbek village, Birlik in Kyrgyzstan had a strong agency of women which connected with other local development organizations and worked actively and independently in the village water committees. Birlik however is politically and geographically a part of Kyrgyzstan while Yambarak is in Uzbekistan. This contrast helps us understand the role of the nature of nation state, not the nation state ideology per se, in discreetly propagating an ideology where superiority to men and obedience to religion are unquestioned phenomena. Though Uzbekistan claims itself to be a non-religious nation-state, the influence of Islam is prevalent here.